The Office of Culture and Design

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Parañaque City

Ph 1700

Clara Balaguer (CB) & Czar Kristoff (CK)

Clara Balaguer is a Rotterdam-based (via Manila) artist, publisher, educator, and sometimes internet troll. Czar Kristoff is a Philippines-based photographer and educator. The two work as a part of the collective publishing imprint Hardworking Goodlooking (HWGL) along with the designers Dante Carlos and Kristian Henson. Through limited-run publications, often produced in Filipino "cottage-industry" presses, the collective engages with such topics as "the decolonization of cultural labor, parlance in the vernacular, and the value of what has been invisible." While several tenants of bootlegging run strong in the studio (collective authorship, politics of print, alternative means of production and distribution), I was particularly curious about the ways in which they contextualize and deploy a unique Filipino vernacular generated from interconnected layers of cultural mimicry. Their publications not only preserve and promote this cultural vocabulary, but attempt to rethink the complex power dynamics involved in any bootlegging or appropriation discourse. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: In my research, I've been reconsidering what bootlegging means today—what an

> extended definition of the gesture might be given the evolution of culture and technologies since its inception. In that spirit, I'm wondering about your relationship to the idea, especially with practices that move between borders. I'm thinking here about ideas of smuggling and infiltration.

CB: I think the term "bootlegging" is a very Western term, more associated with subcultures, especially related to music. In the Philippines, I would equate it with the local understanding of piracy. It's not that I don't like the term "bootleg"—the way it sounds and what it implies is actually really interesting. I like the idea of slipping something in your boot, of smuggling something so close to your body that it reacts to your temperature.

I am interested in piracy, but an ethical form of piracy, if that can even exist. Ethical in the sense also of being a collective code, as honorable as possible in the eyes of a ragtag few who function at the edges of legality, in the realm of the dishonorable. And an ethics constructed with the possibility of unalignment, of individual boundaries (moralities) that are in slight disagreement.

I think about unauthorized redistribution. Piracy for me involves this concept of booty. Essentially, booty you are looting. There are of course several factors to consider in this looting. Who is receiving a majority of the benefits or profits? From whom are you taking, and to whom are you redirecting this expropriation? It's not as cut-and-dry as saying that any desirable end justifies any means whatsoever. How can those means involve as little violence as possible? When is that theft simply a form of restitution that

could by no other means be acquired? What rules govern the notion of thievery, who wrote those rules, and whom do those rules disproportionately benefit?

I also really connect with this idea of smuggling between borders. I recently migrated my practice from Manila to Rotterdam, where I live today. And in that respect I see bootlegging relating to this idea of remittance. In Filipino culture, you are often expected or driven to migrate to richer lands in search of opportunity, and then remit much of the capital you earn abroad back to your family at home. The culture of remittance is not just socially ingrained in the kinship politics of the Philippines—a kinship based not as strictly on blood as it is on debt, and debts of gratitude, and neighborly proximity—these remittances are economic touchstones. They account for roughly 11% of the country's GDP.

I left the Philippines for a professional opportunity overseas, like so many other people. Unlike so many other people, I have the privilege of a dual nationality passport that allows me mobility. I left, and logically got closer to the microphone of access to (cultural) capital. I think about trafficking within and through institutional walls, how to facilitate a system for people to do their own trafficking... of bodies, of knowledge, of practices, rigging it so that others too can be in range of that proverbial microphone.

CK: I also think of bootlegging as pirating, and the ubiquity of pirating music in the two-thousands. When it comes to design, I remember in the early stage of my photography practice, I worked for magazines, and was often given reference images by the editor or clients. They are called "peg" from "jpeg," but also "peg" like a "pegboard." These references were often

from the West, and Filipino photographers and stylists would essentially try to copy them. I think bootlegging for us is much more aspirational, an attempt at mimicking what was considered beautiful by the West, which I think is also important to reassess.

CB: Exactly, bootlegging from the periphery is often aspirational. You're trying to bootleg whiteness, Western culture, modernism. And I love the term "peg," it speaks to what or whom you are trying to serve.

> BS: I'm curious about this cultural mimicry, especially as it's filtered through your practice Hardworking Goodlooking. I'm interested in how this attempt to emulate or recreate another culture might become its own unique framework or identity. I'm also interested in the complex and delicate dynamics between the various cultures.

CB: I've been thinking of HWGL recently in the framework of ventriloquism. A friend of mine actually bootlegged a book for me, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, which speaks to this idea of not trying to copy but to throw your voice, to control the dummy. With our work, I believe we were trying to reverse that source of power, to be the ventriloquist of a voice in design (or material culture) and not the dummy beholden to a foreign puppet master. The Western—sigh, caveat, yes, I get that the West is a contested concept, but here I speak from an imperfect map drawn from the lens of a Southeast Asian postcolony—voice is inevitably present, or rather this bootlegged Western voice is always present. It is undeniable that graphic design, as a field of professionalized

practice, was invented as a Euro-Anglo project. This fact can never be undone, and it would be disingenuous to think that we can renege these roots. Well, OK, perhaps it was not really *invented* by the West, but rather given a name, structure of certification, canon of propriety, all mass-instituted in public consciousness as a profession. HWGL is interested in not just mimicking the modernist West, but speaking with, within, and against it, discovering our own language of agency. This language was made possible by the work of Kristian Henson and Dante Carlos coming into contact with mine and Czar's notions of design, learned elsewhere and otherwise.

The demographics of our publishing hauz are a microcosm of Filipino-ness, skewed slightly towards privileged class. Quick-and-dirty statistics state that HWGL is 50% queer, 50% straight, 75% cismale, 15% cisfemale, 50% diaspora, 50% local, 12.5% white, 12.5% Taiwanese, 75% Filipino native (but 0% indigenous), 25% middle class, 50% second generation upper class, 25% old school upper class. Two people educated abroad within a highly modernist Western system, but with a tender longing for a local culture from which they were dislocated through migration. And two others—both born and raised in the Philippines, yet of different class strata—doing field work and translation, as well as "the design work" itself, both working through a distancing from post-colonial inferiority complex.

Kristian and Dante were able to pass hybridized local culture through their filter to create a specific vernacular. It's not necessarily local, but it takes the local as a starting point. And here, Czar and I have

pp. 246–247: Spread from *FFF (Filipino Folk Foundry)* (2015)

"ERCING"
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Libra
ILARAWAN ANG HOROSCOPE SIGN NYO.
Draw your horoscope sign
BIBLE
ILARAWAN ANG ISANG BAGAY NA RELIHIYOSO
Draw something religious
HAMBURGE
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FONTSIV
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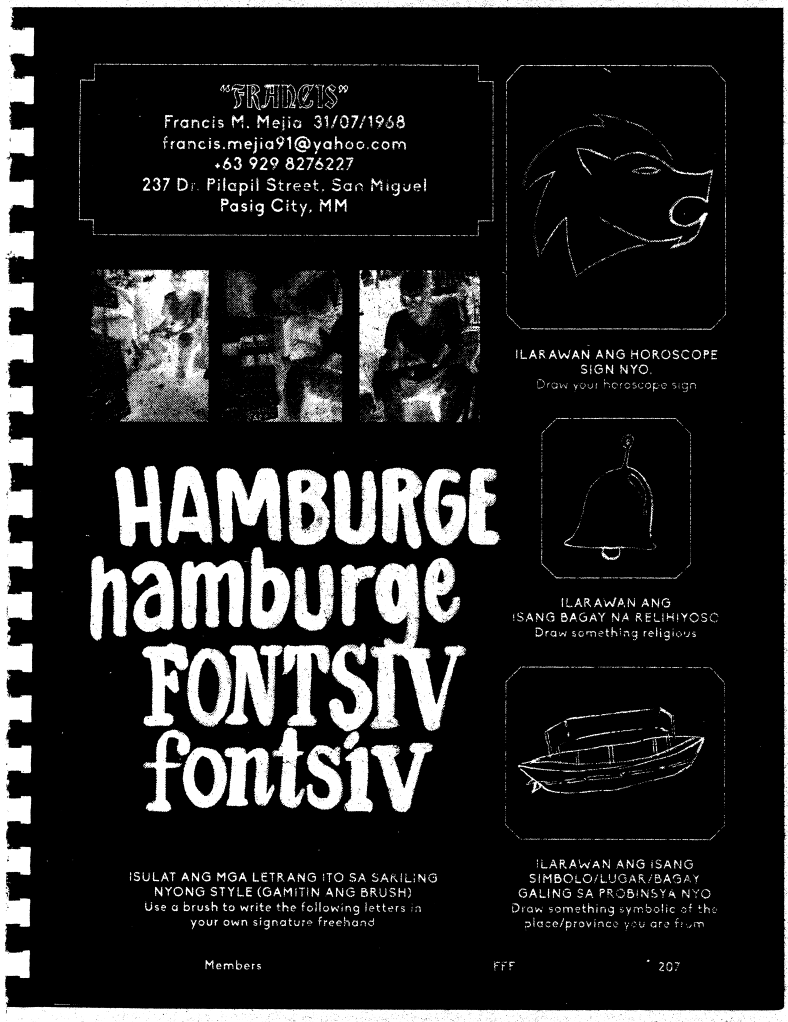
ISULAT ANG MGA LETRANG ITO SA SARILING NYONG STYLE (GAMITIN ANG BRUSH)
Use a brush to write the following letters in your own signature freehand
ILARAWAN ANG ISANG SIMBOLO/LUGAR/BAGAY GALING SA PROBINSYA NYO
Draw something symbolic of the place/province you are from
Members
FFF
206


"FRANCIS"
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+63 929 8276227
237 Dr. Pilapil Street. San Miguel
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HAMBURGE
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Draw your horoscope sign
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Draw something religious
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played a key role. As interlocal interlocutors, translating a landscape unfamiliar, unfamiliar even sometimes to ourselves. This relaying has involved active rediscovery of our home territory. And in that relay of data, providing context and emotion, not just mood board imagery, our interpreting has also conspired to create this creolized visual lexicon. Without this diasporic and multi-shaded exchange, this new dialect would not have been possible.

Filipino visual culture is subject to a condition or conditioning which gives it the delightfully and painfully wild aesthetic we see today. So we are interested in interacting with that visual culture, understanding the conditions that created it in order to define new rules for play.

It's not this idea of decolonizing as a refusal. It's impossible to refuse all the things we have become indoctrinated with. I can't refuse my post-colonial self. I can only engage in its repair and repurpose. It's also quite easy to refuse when one already has a subsidized, funded seat at the Western fountainhead. On the edges of want, in the outskirts of visibility, in the realm of the barely audible, one cannot totally refuse the structure of force and control imposed upon you. How do you reverse the relationship to this conditioning, inverting the ratio of power, acknowledging yourself as inextricably entangled with it? You become the ventriloquist, not the dummy. And how to love the dummy as well, even as you bend its voice to yours? Fucking complicated. Because there is this fascination with modernism as well, this respect for its forms and shapes, a nod to its noble intention of common, inclusive order (however failed this inclusivity might have been.) Common in the sense of the people. The unsubjugated respect for modernism coexists with an uniron-

ic love for vulgarity. Vulgar in the sense of the everyday, the way certain plants are given the species name *vulgaris* because they grow everywhere, are well-known. I will not pretend I don't like any Western design or that I haven't learned anything from its practitioners, many of whom I consider friends, many of whom are not white.

> BS: I love that you brought up this idea of ventriloquism. I've been interested in gathering analogies that relate to bootlegging and help me to pinpoint a more specific or developed understanding of the act. Lately I've been thinking of karaoke vs. lip syncing. It's about copying but adding your own voice, performing, participating.

CB: Right! There is a lot of joy in knowing it's a copy through your own voice. TikTok remixes are a testament to that collective pleasure.

CK: It makes me think of drag performances. When you put on drag, you create a new version of yourself or extension of yourself and/or embody the person that you aspire to be. And most of the time there is a performance involved to activate this drag you created. Most of the time they sing songs by a diva, or in some cases by a pop group like Vengaboys. Through this process, they could articulate and/or practice their own desires, their hopes, their dreams through the lyrics, the rhythm, the vibration of the speakers, the stage, the clap. A friend who visited me recently here in the Philippines asked me, "Why do Filipino men like to sing songs about heartbreaks?" I responded, "Probably because men aren't allowed and/or trained

to articulate our feelings, so we just sing them for three to four minutes, and in most cases fueled by Kwatro kantos, Tanduay, or a bucket of beer."

CB: I have been trying to locate, to no avail, an explanation of a corporate talking format/exercise called "bull session." In vernacular talk in the Philippines (borrowing, I believe, from North American slang), it's like saying "let's get down to business" or "let's have a real talk." But I once read a paper or article that described it as a kind of role-playing conversation where I, as a participant, could inhabit opinions that I didn't really possess or were opposite to how I might really think or feel. In this setting, I could say something without certainty being ascribed to it. It's a place to try out an extension of the I's persona. It allows for the possibility of retraction: statements are a costume. It could also be a roundabout way of saying without saying, of smuggling an opinion you cannot fully express yet for fear of the retributions around honesty. This can be frustrating, to not be able to speak of things directly, but it is understandably attractive in cultures that prize saving face. Bull sessions feel like a form of bootlegging.

> BS: Earlier you mentioned the idea of ethical piracy. I think that today in fashion there is this idea of an "official bootleg." How do these two contradictory ideas exist alongside each other in your practices?

CB: It has a lot to do with the conditions I touched upon earlier: who's copying, to what extent, and for what purpose. I'm most concerned with the "who's copying" aspect of this. In some conversations with

people involved with F/LOSS (Free/Libre Open-Source Software), my concern with who's copying is slightly distasteful. In this community, there can be this idealistic notion of free = free for everyone without restrictions, even to those you may not align with. It is an anarchist more than socialist approach to property. (Oh yeah, I don't use socialism as a boogeyman word, as some people do in the U.S.) Even though it's a free market, there are still power structures that apply and that are activated swiftly to crush little people with good ideas. How do you regulate the oppressive tendency of an unregulated market? How can you keep it truly free? Freedom implies equity.

I do think F/LOSS is a noble way of approaching culture, content, and creation. But in its purest sense, it can also be a bit naive, as it doesn't necessarily take intersectionality of struggles into account. Who is copying very much matters. Free culture becomes painful when you are on the lower rungs of the power ladder. This is where something like cultural appropriation comes into play.

While cultural appropriation discourse is a way to protect communities who are marginalized, taken to an extreme it becomes problematic. It becomes a discourse of racial purity vehiculated by the progressive left, who have become progressively puritan. It's punitive puritanism that uncomfortably fertilizes soil for the rise of the alt-right.

There's nothing progressive about racial or cultural purity. It is often merely the same oppression, just with another hand holding the whip. The weapon of purity is wielded not just amongst the rich, wealthy, white, and cismale. It is often turned on people who are on the same side but living through singularly different experiences of what racial, cultural, gendered,

and so many other forms of marginalization can be. A culture of disproportionate offense that positions any question as attack and invalidation... this kind of culture generates an inability to dialogue with difference. Like any form of inbreeding, it is unhealthy in the long run. No matter how justified the motive of segregation, at the end of the day, when applied as a default form of structural operation and not as a tactical defense mechanism, segregation is harmful because it precludes diversity. When we are fighting more often with each other than with the systems that subjugate us all in the first place, this makes the work of seeking justice, redress, and change more exhausting than it needs to be. I'm tired.

When you talk about appropriation vs. bootlegging, there are so many nuanced factors at play. We need to be thinking about contexts, intention. Yes, intention. Controversial, as the road to hell is paved with good intentions. But yes, intention: it doesn't exonerate, but it does mitigate. Maybe it's also about setting up personal limits, which I have to often do when moonlighting as an internet troll hunter. I need to establish my own moral limits of who I hunt, why, in what circumstances, and how far I go.

BS: Can trolling be bootlegging?

CB: I think yes, if you're inhabiting a different persona. There are infiltrator trolls, who smuggle themselves into forums by misrepresenting their position. These trolls exit their own echo chamber and pretend to be on the side of whatever it is they actually oppose, making subtle counter-arguments within the community they infiltrate. It's a long process to break down ideologies and build sensitivity. At times,

you're forced to cede your own morality to build a larger ethical framework. Counter-indoctrination doesn't happen overnight and it's important to keep the greater goal in mind, for example, trolling against fascism or toppling the patriarchy. I've sometimes found myself at odds with some behaviors of troll pack members I've hunted alongside. I'm careful how I critique people's behavior in those affinity-action groups. You don't want to destroy relationships within the pack. But also, pawning your moral boundaries to peer pressure is unsettling. It's not fun to troll hunt as a tiny mob when your comrades are being openly transphobic, classist, racist, misogynistic, etcetefuckingra. Again, it's a long game, a slow process to create change. And it cannot really be done alone. Change is almost invariably a collective process. The dark beauty of collectivity is that it is a labor of holding difference so that we may evolve together, at different speeds but at the same time, or at least in the same direction

> BS: I feel like it relates back to this notion of a bull session: the suspension of acceptability for a more honest conversation, or in this case, to reach a particular goal.

CB: Yes, it makes me think about what is happening right now. The right are very adept at being tolerant within their own ideology because they are the culturally deviant position. A GOP gayservative can work with a Christian evangelist hardliner if it means getting Trump re-elected. There is an ideological truce that happens, an acceptance of working (or trolling) together to support the same larger ideas. The left, on the other hand, is deeply fragmented.

All the infighting to define who on the left holds the purest version of being on the left means losing sight of any larger goal, of the shared struggle.

> BS: I'm curious about the relationship between bootlegging, trolling, and legitimacy. Trolling, like bootlegging, used to feel like an underground, bottom-up, subversive act meant to wreak havoc on those in power. And now the trolls hold the power, using troll-like tactics that create an aura of outsider authenticity. In a similar progression, I think about bootlegs embraced by luxury brands, and the complex and confusing ways in which they garner legitimacy by embracing the aesthetics of illegitimacy.

CB: Right. It's about understanding these aesthetics of legitimacy, and how those can be used or manipulated. Manipulated as in handled, molded, something that happens with the hands. In the past, for example in traditional news media, to be legitimate you had to have a polished, error-free look that made it seem like there was a legitimately professional apparatus supporting your image, graphics, output. But now the aesthetics of trust come from imperfection. Grainy, jerky cell phone or CCTV footage on the news feels slightly more believable than high-res camera work. The same goes for conspiracy theories and how they generate a sense of accessing knowledge that short circuits centralized narratives of power. And this shift, where authorities are realizing the potential of a grassroots aesthetic, is nothing new. We're just reawakening to how much a part of our culture this is.

I used to work at an advertising agency, and when we would have campaigns with user-generated content, I would make fake user content to falsify public interest. This is called astroturfing. I didn't realize how insidious this was at the time. But then that's advertising for you. A corruption of the mind, flesh, spirit. A deal with the devil, who incidentally sells potato chips. Villainhood is ever so complex. The devil is also a methodical teacher if you are able to not only survive, but transcend him. (I've used astroturfing in my troll hunting as a non-violent way of seeding other points of view.) Yes, him. Advertising was also patriarchy par excellence.

> BS: Czar, I'd love to hear about your Temporary UnReLearning (URL) Academy. To me it speaks to the potential of bootlegging structures and systems, a way for the gesture to move beyond objects.

CK: I would say that Temporary UnReLearning Academy is an accumulation of different structures that I was able to encounter and experienced since I started my practice. It is a nest made from different types of twigs and leaves. Or actually, it is a nest modeled from other nests.

The collective 98B Collaboratory are the first people who welcomed me to be part of a conversation. This was back in 2013. I did not know anyone from the art and cultural community. My world back then revolved only around photography, skateboarding, Tumblr (Academy), and unemployment. I see great value in this encounter especially when Mark Salvatus, who was the director back then, introduced me to a pirate copy of Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. I think from then

on, I became more critical and serious with my work. I somehow had an idea of the direction of my life.

Another important part of this nest is Thousandfold. It was initiated by Wawi Navarroza in 2015, to provide a space for photographers to get to know each other and introduce us to critical conversations and projects. They organized a photography festival, portfolio reviews, discussion on photobooks—in some way, I see Thousandfold as a school. I live in the outskirts of Manila and I vividly remember taking the PNR train just to attend these gatherings. This is how I met Clara actually, who I only knew through the internet, as an Instagram friend. After a year, Clara and I did a series of book pirating workshops/sessions. We would meet at a cafe with friends and each bring books. The cafe was situated next to a copy shop and we would go over and just photocopy the books we liked. During these sessions we would talk about our book selection and also talk about politics, pop culture, gossip, et cetera. I would say that this type of gathering reminded me that learning can happen anywhere, that studying in a group is always fun, and also that it is okay to pirate, especially if it is for educational purposes!

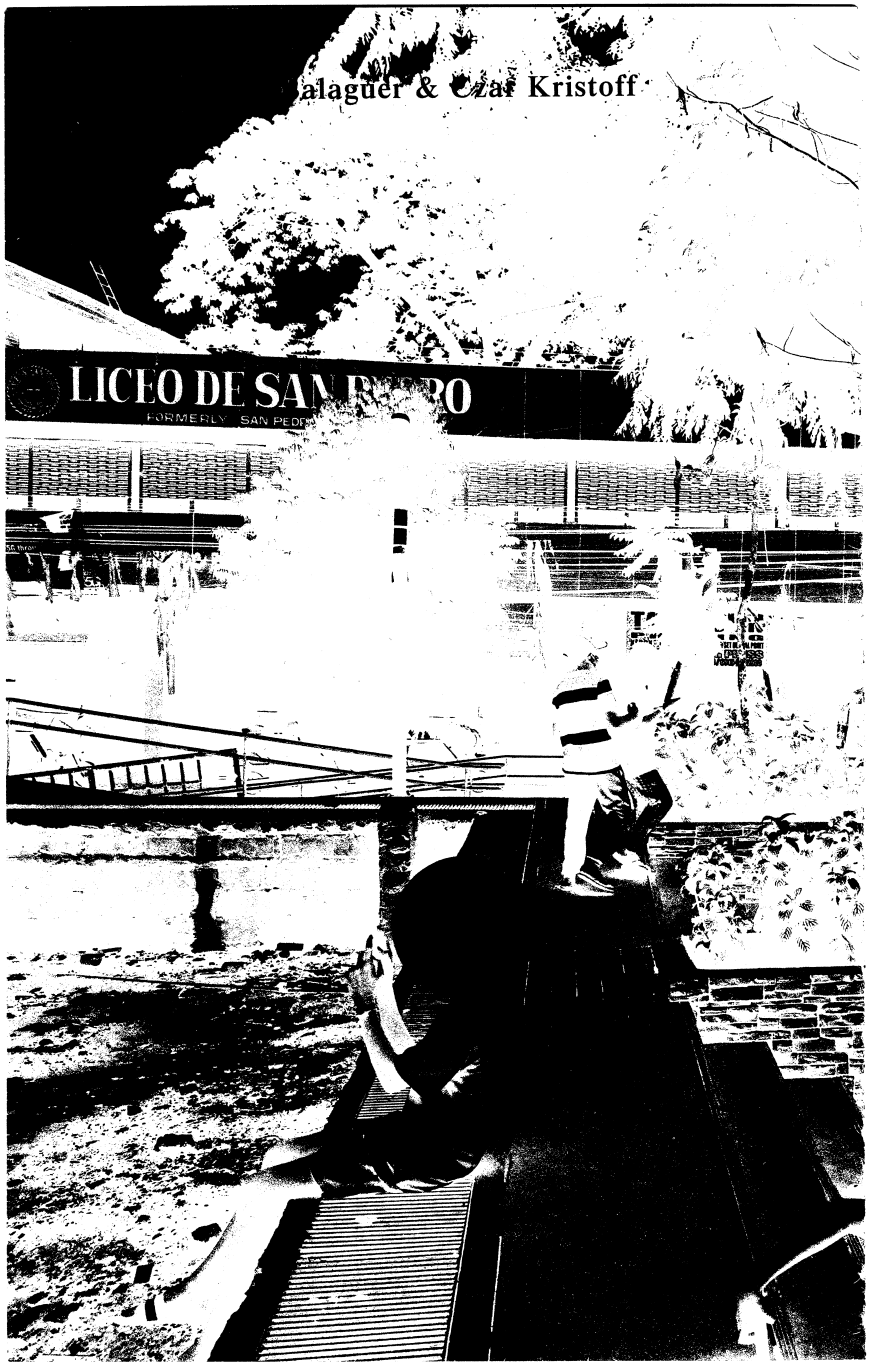
My encounter with Para://Site Projects in 2017 was also a big part of the conception of URL. It was founded by siblings Mariano Batocabe and Abbey Romina. They would organize exhibitions, film screenings, and talks at their home in Las Piñas, at a farm (hosted by Saree Gloria), a botanical garden (with Nomina Nuda), and even within a Minecraft server (with Club Matryoshka, Likido, and Spoonin Boys). I was attracted to their practice because somehow it reminds me how skateboarders (re)define spaces. And also they were very welcoming. I was

not part of their circle, but they were kind enough to let me intervene in their nests.

Also, my involvement with Hardworking Good-looking, being exposed to material and content that I rarely pay attention to, was a big part of the formation of URL. I remember in 2019 when Clara and I visited the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong—I would say it was a life-changing moment. I remember being surrounded by thousands of books written by brilliant minds, and I couldn't help but be emotional. Because access to endless knowledge is a privilege that I do not think I would have had, given my social background.

Intramuros is a walled city located in Manila, built by the Spaniards during their colonization. Within this city, the first universities were established. In an article by Peter Murphy and Trevor Hogan called "Discordant Order: Manila's Neo-Patrimonial Urbanism"—which was, by the way, distributed to me by a friend with JSTOR access—they say that, "Variations of the Intramuros model became widespread through the Philippine archipelago. This was based on a social-symbolic understanding that the world was divided into domains with strong boundaries and that careful gatekeeping was needed so as to regulate the relation between domain and environment in favor of the protected domain rather than open environment. This contrasts with the church-and-plaza model where the apse and square – or the portico and square – function as inter-mediation between domains. In the latter case, persons are constantly crossing from one domain to another through the portal spaces of public spheres. In this model, gateways operate to facilitate

pp. 258–261: Workshops hosted at Temporary URL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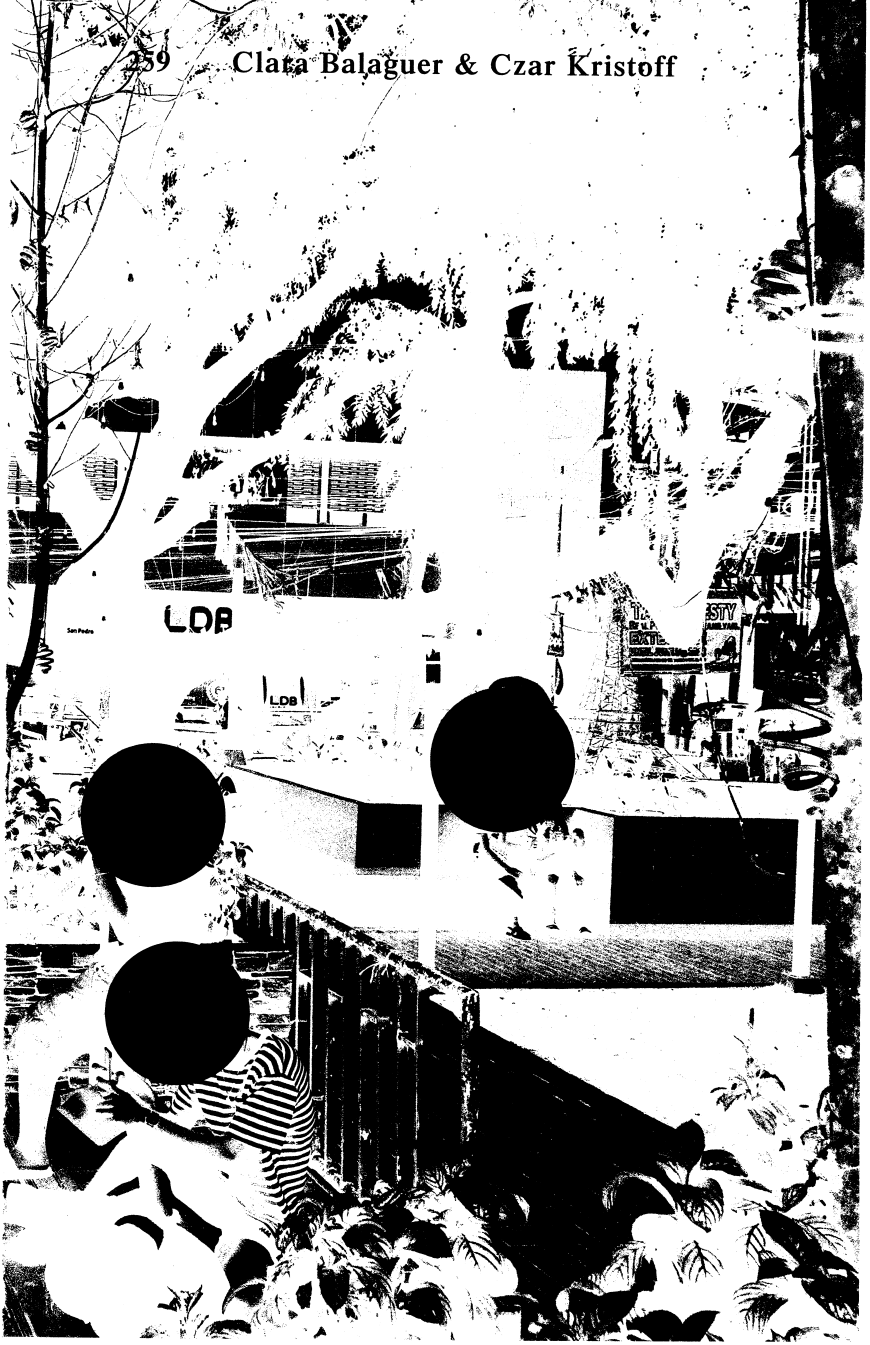
Clara Balaguer & Czar Kristoff



orderly traffic between domain and environment." I have been thinking a lot about this text recently.

The people and organizations I mentioned earlier play a big role in the agency that I have now. They are the portals that provided new possibilities. And I think the formation of URL is a way to extend the goodness of these portals. The act of extending as bootlegging. But I think in reality, there is a lot of work to do. URL is still within the gateways I would say. It operates within privileged domains, those who have access to the internet for example, those who are connected to its network. How about those who are beyond URL's reach? How will the leaking and redistribution reach them? I do admit that URL is imperfect at the moment, but to be sure, the one thing that it will not bootleg is the oppressive structure of Intramuros and its bootlegs.

CB: So what Czar did is make his own art school in reaction to the monolithic art education in the Philippines. We don't have art schools, but we do have certain departments in certain universities, oftentimes turning out artists with a very similar output. So Czar created Temporary URL in defiance of those institutions. And that was also my experience: for so many years doing pedagogy and workshops, and in reality what I was setting up were schools. The workshop is an educational format, it only took me ten years to realize, oh, I'm an educator.

CK: It has been challenging to enter an academy as a teacher. I had to prove that I am worthy and capable, which of course every job application requires. But I guess I was used to conducting workshops without thinking about if what I give is/ I am enough.

But luckily, the school I used to work at was very interested in the pedagogical approach I did for URL and outside of URL. So when I was working on the syllabus for the semester, I was referencing a lot to what URL embodies. I would say that I bootlegged URL for this particular school. :-)

> BS: It gets at this idea of infiltration. Maybe the most effective way to change any system is to work from within?

CB: Right, it's all about getting through security.

Title page (p. 240): Logo for The Office of Culture & Design